



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

12 | 2016

Mapping gender. Old images ; new figures

Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel*

Gilles Menegaldo



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8076>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.8076

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Gilles Menegaldo, "Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel*", *Miranda* [Online], 12 | 2016, Online since 26 February 2016, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/8076> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8076>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel*

Gilles Menegaldo

REFERENCES

Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel* (Bern, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2015), 364 p, ISBN 978-3-0343-1588-3

- 1 *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel* (364 pages including bibliography and index), written by a renowned specialist of Wilkie Collins and Victorian studies, treads on new territory and fills a gap in studies of the sensation novel by focusing on a specific category of characters, the “professionals”, at a period (1850-1870) when their status was being redefined. This term includes indeed various types. Doctors, lawyers (and detectives) are well identified as fiction characters and have been analyzed by critics, but other categories like writers, painters, stage actors, journalists, have so far been less studied, apart from specific cases. The merit of this book is to examine the various fictional uses of all these professionals in a number of sensation novels, some quite well known (*The Woman in White*, *Armadale*), others worthy of discovery. The author investigates “the modalities with which the practitioners of the genre narrativised their society’s and their own concerns over the changing facets of professionalism” (17). She has chosen to focus on the work of four important sensation novelists: Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charles Reade and Ellen Wood. The title of the volume already implies a form of dynamic tension between the two words. “Sensation” evokes passion, transgression, excess, irrationality, while “professionalism” connotes seriousness, competence, measure, rationality. Of course, the predicament of these various professionals is usually more complex and their identity more unstable and ambivalent, as the book demonstrates.

- 2 The densely written introduction raises a number of important issues. One is that the professional class is set within a social structure that it both validates and destabilizes, combining conformity to social rules and freedom, hence its unstable position and the attempt at self-redefinition. Another issue is the rise of new professionals in search of status and recognition (especially creative artists but also journalists). These preoccupations dealt with by sociologists are also reflected and dramatized in the novels, primarily in sensation novels, another issue being the centrality of sensationalism in Victorian literature.
- 3 The book is structured into two main parts and 8 chapters. The first part, entitled “Cultural and Artistic Professionals”, is divided in 4 chapters and deals with new professions in the artistic field (writers, painters, actors). The second part, entitled “Tradition and Innovation: Medicine and the Legal World”, deals with more established professions such as doctors and lawyers (barristers, solicitors, attorneys), but also detectives and policemen who feature recurrently as fictional characters in sensation novels. The first chapter focuses on the specificities of the sensation genre and the controversies it generated. The genre was perceived by some critics as a “remarkably offensive construct” (49) and sensation novelists were accused of commercialism and also of debasing literature. The author gives some defining features of sensation literature, quoting critics like George Augustus Sala who, conversely, defended this genre in the name of “thrill”, but also because of its realistic approach, closer to real experience, “an honest depiction of contemporary life”. Hence the tribute paid to French realist literature despite its “immorality”.
- 4 The second chapter delineates various textual examples of fictional doubles created by the writers to expose their preoccupations and contradictions as sensation novelists. These characters are often featured as complex and ambivalent, endowed with genuine qualities, but also beset by various flaws, such as greed, selfishness, perversion, etc. Chapter three contrasts conflicting views of authorship and raises both ethical and aesthetic issues. Chapter 4 focuses on painters and draws portraits of “transgressive bohemians”, torn between commercialism and artistic ideals. Lastly, Chapter 5 deals with theatre actors and actresses, struggling, with various means, for social and professional recognition. In the second part Chapter 6 foregrounds the issue of ethics in its depiction of various representatives of the legal profession. Chapter 7 deals with various other problematic representatives of law and order such as professional detectives but also amateur sleuths, spies, etc. Chapter 8 examines the way the medical profession is represented, highlighting in particular the fear of the dehumanizing effects of scientific research and the “potential conflict between vocational and entrepreneurial principles”. It also raises the question of the role of women (nurses, doctors) in the medical profession and of the problems encountered by marginal racialized subjects striving for recognition in that field. In *A Woman-Hater* Charles Reade offers a compelling albeit ambiguous portrait of a female medical practitioner, Dr Rhoda Gale, a *neither/nor* figure, an “androgynous creature, blurring identity markers” (340), which foregrounds issues concerning the emancipation of women and the possible defeminizing effects of medical practice.
- 5 *Sensation and Professionalism in the Victorian Novel* is very well documented and provides a wealth of information on the various topics it deals with. It borrows from many sources, as the rich bibliography testifies. Costantini mobilizes very aptly and convincingly various concepts such as the Kristevian notion of non-disjunction which

fits quite well characters marked by ambiguity and ambivalence or the notion of “impurity” first used by anthropologist Mary Douglas and also by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*. This notion is very pertinent to study texts that are characterized by the staging of various forms of transgression and moral perversion and by generic hybridity (“a violent yoking of romance and realism”, 26). Artistic greatness is also often identified with the representation of evil and impurity. Among other major theoretical references are Roland Barthes (the concept of *chiaroscuro* applied to literature, the notion of “shadow”, in *The Pleasure of the Text*), Michel Foucault (*Naissance de la Clinique. Une archéologie du regard médical, Surveiller et punir*), Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. Sociological studies (Harold Perkin, Philip Elliott, Penelope Corfield, Magali Sarfatti Larson, Pierre Bourdieu, etc.) are also referred to, as well as many scholarly works on the sensation novel.

- 6 Each chapter introduces the main topic by providing contextual elements and highlighting the main preoccupations encountered by the type of professional that is focused upon. This paves the way for the very thorough and precise scrutiny of the fictional works by means of various approaches, thematic, contextual but also stylistic (at times also gender theory). For example, Chapter 4, “Sensational virtuosi of the brush”, devoted to painters, is introduced by several enlightening pages on the actual predicament of many painters torn between high aesthetic aspirations and commercial imperatives, especially since the diminishing of state and church commissions and the relying on patrons of the art. In the various chapters, Costantini points out the links existing between the professions depicted and the authors’ personal experiences, which enable them to provide a realistic portrayal (ie. Braddon’s experience as a magazine editor, but also as a stage actress, Collins’s knowledge of famous painters of the period or his own frequenting of doctors due to his poor health).
- 7 Costantini pays attention to the structure of the novels, their narrative techniques, their main formal discursive devices, their modes of characterization (depicting an incredible gallery of characters, more or less conformist or eccentric, often transgressive), the specific choices of lexis, the uses of dialogue, etc. Each study reveals an intimate knowledge of the works and a brilliant critical acumen. She manages to point out the subtlety of characterization, highlighting the ambivalence, a key notion to define these novels, but also, at times, some inconsistencies in the narrative pattern or delineation of characters.
- 8 Another key element is foregrounded, the meta-textual dimension of these novels, especially those which feature creative artists. Writers serve as fictional doubles of the authors and help highlight some aspects of their own predicament and of their main preoccupations—economic, moral and aesthetic. Mary Elizabeth Braddon is a case in point with the character of Hawkehurst (“a plausible alter ego of Braddon”) who “combines bourgeois life-style with bohemian tastes, hack writing with professionalism” in *Charlotte’s Inheritance* or Westray in *Hostages to Fortune*. Braddon rethinks the profession of writer in the light of the cultural production of the age and also challenges the Dickensian equation between labour and productivity. In the same way, Myra Brandreth, a successful actress, manager and script editor, expressing “her preference for stories which mirror the crude reality of things” (125) is a mouthpiece for Braddon in *Hostages to Fortune*. Collins also uses fictional doubles, writers such as Basil in his eponymous first novel or actresses like Lydia Gwilt in *Armada*. One of the meta-literary issues raised is that of the difficult relationship between lowbrow popular

forms and serious highbrow literature, with the aim for the novelist of upgrading sensation novels to the level of proper realistic fiction.

- 9 A small regret would be the lack of a general conclusion which might have helped gather the many threads which constitute the fabric of this well written, well researched and very stimulating book whose reading requires attention because of its density and its rich and complex argumentation, but proves very rewarding. It is also a strong incentive for the reader to discover or go back to these novels often neglected and little known to the general public while they do provide the reader with the thrills they may ask for. As George Augustus Sala, a staunch advocate of sensation novels, stated: “We want meat; and this is a strong age, and we can digest it”. Costantini’s book is indeed highly exciting to read and also “food for thought”.
-

INDEX

Mots-clés: conformisme, bourgeoisie, transgression, criminalité, professionnel, marché de l’art, éthique, esthétique, idéalisme, matérialisme, commercialisme, pureté, impureté, abjection.

Keywords: conformism, bourgeoisie, transgression, criminality, professional, art market, ethics, aesthetics, idealism, materialism, commercialism, purity, impurity, abjection.

AUTHORS

GILLES MENEGALDO

Professeur émérite

Université de Poitiers

gilles.menegaldo@univ-poitiers.fr